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The New Vulnerability Of Higher Education

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The New Vulnerability of Higher Education

By John W. Cole and Gerald F. Reid

Academic life in the United States has fallen on hard times. Evidence for this assertion is everywhere, but nowhere is it more apparent than in the decline of public and private support for higher education and in the shift of funding away from the liberal arts and towards technological fields and management programs. These developments constrain the work of professors in the arts and sciences, stifle critical research, stall the dissemination of knowledge, rupture the continuity of venerable academic traditions, and threaten to dissolve the professorial collegiality that evolves from the sense of a shared intellectual mission.

The result is uncertainty about the future of American academic life. Uncertainty about the ideals

that previously invigorated the academy. Uncertainty—among those caught in this tangle of change—about themselves. About their profession.

Why is this happening? The academy and the professoriate are, to be sure, under assault. But in that, there is nothing new. What is new is the broad anti-academic consensus behind this assault. What is new is how deeply vulnerable the academy has become. Our question—Why is this happening?—translates into the question: What is there about the 1970s and '80s that has made vulnerability the defining characteristic of life on America's campuses?

Our thesis is that the shift in attitudes toward the academy—especially among the powerful—is a product of changes that have

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The shift in attitudes toward the academy is a product of changes that have been taking place in the American political economy.

been taking place in the American political economy. We will focus on two interrelated aspects of these changes that seem particularly important: first, the rapid expansion of the white-collar sector of the economy and the corporate takeover and reorganization of this sector; second, the social movements of the post-war era, during which people who had previously been largely excluded from power began to assert themselves.

The number and percentage of white-collar workers in the U.S. workforce has been expanding since the turn of the century. The increase was fairly modest during the first decades of the century, but after World War II, the rate of increase accelerated. In 1920 white-collar workers made up less than 20 percent of the work force; today they comprise more than 50 percent of the work force, and this figure is expected to climb to over 60 percent by 1990.¹

During most of this period of expansion, white-collar work was carried out in small enterprises (but with a significant minority employed in the various levels of government). In the absence of standardization, most training took place on the job, and much initiative and even in-

novation was required of employees. Service and retail workers were assigned tasks that they would see through from beginning to end. The worker would meet the consumer, discover what was required, do the work himself or (more rarely) herself, and make the final disposition of the service.²

This contrasts sharply with manufacturing, where large corporations established a clear division between management and production workers and where the work process had been "rationalized."³ The routinized work on the production line required no formal education beyond high school, and, to run a plant, trained engineers and managers could be hired from any engineering school or management program. Engineering and management curricula had been established to meet the manufacturer's requirements and were standardized throughout the land.⁴

White-collar work, on the other hand, had not been "rationalized." And the growing complexity of much white-collar work demanded higher levels of literacy. While a post-secondary education was therefore called for, there was no way for the myriad of small employers to

A student's major was rarely a matter of concern to anyone except the student. Employers wanted people who could read and write, count and calculate.

agree on a precise program of training for potential workers. Under these circumstances, a liberal arts education was ideal. The B.S. or B.A. degree was a seal ensuring a certain minimum level of literacy; the grade point average an estimate of the level of literacy of each student relative to all others. The student's major, however, was rarely a matter of concern to anyone except, possibly, the student. It was not what students had learned that was of interest to the potential employer, but their intelligence and literacy. Employers wanted people who could read and write, count and calculate.

Certainly the faculties of arts and sciences and the number of students they taught expanded markedly during the post-war period and on into the Vietnam era. A college education was promoted as the road to social mobility. It would enrich one's enjoyment of life and teach an appreciation for nature and culture; it would make one a more aware and responsible citizen; and incidentally, it would significantly improve one's ability to earn money. Everyone was exposed to statistics comparing the average salaries and life earnings of college graduates to those who did not attend college.

There was a fine fit between the economic function of the academy and the liberal ideology of the United States as a meritocracy. In concrete terms, this meritocratic ideology translated into the tenet that since success in modern life requires a high degree of literacy, all citizens deserve access to the education they need in order to be able to develop their abilities—their “merits”—as fully as possible. In principle, liberals favored admitting all qualified individuals who wanted to go to college.

The liberal version of the meritocracy made sense to the leaders of the day. An expanding economy that required growing numbers of literate workers made access to higher education for the masses seem economically and politically logical. This created a political climate in which both public and private funds could be mobilized in support of the academy and in which barriers excluding segments of the population from the colleges and universities could be attacked. The GI Bill after World War II is widely regarded as the wedge in the door to higher education through which passed more and more people whose parents had had little education. The civil rights, women's and poor peo-

The triumph of the concept of equity, though imperfect, nonetheless produced a situation that we may well look back on as the Golden Age of the Academy.

ple's movements all claimed access to higher education among their goals and found support among many corporate and political leaders. One must note that although advances occurred, the ideal of equal access to higher education was never achieved. The middle-class gained more than the poor, men more than women, whites more than Blacks.⁵

The triumph of the concept of equity produced a situation that we may well look back on as the Golden Age of the Academy. Salaries and benefits weren't bad. Money was available to expand the size of departments and even to create new ones, and there was money to support research as well. Both public and private research foundations were well funded and while a policy board might establish general guidelines, scholars controlled the actual dispersion of funds through the process of peer review. What research was conducted and the content of what was taught in the classroom was of little concern to anyone outside the academy. Universities were prickly in defense of their fiscal autonomy and able to get away with it. Among other things, this meant

that the academic community insisted that it and it alone had the right to determine the curriculum. Society was willing to fund the academy well and leave it to do its own thing. All that was demanded in return was an ever expanding flow of literates to feed the demands of employers of white-collar labor.

This meant that we faculty members enjoyed a rather remarkable degree of intellectual freedom. We could conduct research and write about particles that barely exist in time and space, the eye movement of lower vertebrates, how to motivate rats to become achievement oriented, the content of the medieval manuscripts stored in a monastery in southern Italy, or the kinship structure of people on a small coral atoll. No one seemed to mind—except, of course, the senior senator from Wisconsin. But while pursuing a variety of exotica, we also found time to churn out lots of ideology celebrating the liberal version of the meritocracy and, not incidentally, our own interests. Lots of us also poked around in the workings of America and were constantly finding out that in one way or another the land wasn't working quite as it claimed to be. We had lots of suggestions

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about how to fix it up, too, mostly of a reformist nature but sometimes of a more radical sort.

During the 1970s, however, the nature of white-collar work underwent a fundamental transformation. First, the number of white-collar workers and their percentage in the work force continued to climb. Between 1973 and 1980, there were over 11 million new jobs created in the private sector in the United States (and an additional two million in government). This was the most spectacular expansion of the work force in American history. Of these new jobs, more than 70 percent were in retail and service, and just three subdivisions of this sector provided 40 percent of the new jobs.⁶ These were eating and drinking places, health and business services.

The most significant change during this period, however, was in the characteristic employer of white-collar labor. It was no longer the small private enterprise or government office, but the giant corporation and government bureaucracy. The deskilling process described by Braverman, which had earlier visited blue-collar work with the establishment of the Ford system and Taylorism, rapidly became

characteristic of white-collar work as well. Corporate management used mechanization much as their manufacturing brethren had learned to in an earlier era. They used computers, robots, and other machines to standardize, subdivide, simplify, and routinize work. Above all, they intensified the division between managers and workers.

These changes transformed the white-collar job from one that demanded a certain level of literacy, innovation, and initiative into one of supervised repetition and routine. Such a job hardly requires a college degree.⁷

Most managerial positions do require a college degree, however, but the degree is now more likely to be in business management, computer science, or engineering than in liberal arts. One consequence of the standardization of work is the development of university curricula that turn out graduates specifically—and narrowly—prepared for routinized professional positions.

With most jobs in retail and services reduced to a menial level, and with training for most management positions safely relegated to management and high-tech departments, the economic demand for liberal arts majors is evaporating, and so are enroll-

To corporate leaders and their allies today, white-collar workers trained in liberal arts have become redundant and so have the faculty who teach them.

ments in most liberal arts subjects. The result is that the economic logic supporting the liberal arts is undercut. It also undermines the economic logic of education as a route to social mobility and creates a climate where criticism of liberal ideology is assured of a hearing. To corporate leaders and their political allies today, white-collar workers trained in liberal arts have become redundant and so have the faculty who teach them.

The economic reasons alone are likely enough to cause political and economic leaders to begin to question the value of liberal arts. Not only conservatives but now even a new breed of neoliberals talk about restructuring higher education to make it more attuned to the manpower needs of the emerging high-tech economy.⁸ None of this, however, is enough to account for the Right's enthusiastic hatred of the academy, nor for the willingness of many economic and political leaders to accept the Right's perspective. These can be better understood as a product of two powerful political dynamics.

First, one of the main thrusts of the long decade of the 1960s was to place constraints on the exercise of economic and political

power. Welfare measures, environmental protection legislation, job safety measures, and the move to end the Vietnam War all inhibited the exercise of economic and political power by those who were accustomed to it and saw it as their right. Liberals and especially the left were inclined to view these achievements as at best partial and at worst as coopting measures that left established power entrenched, but corporate leaders and their political allies felt themselves under serious siege.⁹

Secondly, these leaders also feared the political means used to challenge their power. The initiation of these political and economic reforms came not from within their own ranks through instituted political channels, but from the streets, by means of "extra-parliamentary" politics carried out by people who had not previously been politically active. They came from the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the poor people's movement, from the gay rights campaign, and the anti-Vietnam War movement. The goal of these efforts was more often to influence established political institutions rather than to destroy or replace them, but establishment leaders nevertheless felt

The academic community was deeply involved in support of the thrust of the '60s, and corporate leaders came to loathe and fear it.

threatened. These developments were an important motivation behind the formation of the Trilateral Commission in 1973. It was formed by corporate and political leaders who saw in this "democratic surge" an erosion of their exclusive control of legitimate economic and political power.¹⁰

Third, and crucial for this discussion, was the role that the academy played in these movements. With the possible exception of the movement against the war in Vietnam, none of the movements originated within the academy, but the academy gave strong support to all of them. It is true, as Ladd and Lipset have written, that the academy was "divided." Not all academics supported these movements, but there was a substantial segment that did, and most of these supporters came from liberal arts.¹¹ Not only did academics, including administrators, faculty, and students help these movements develop supporting ideologies, but many of them were political activists. They joined in street actions or went to Washington, or to one of the state houses, as politicians, bureaucrats, advisers, and lobbyists. Moreover, colleges and universities were among the centers where activities were

organized and directed.

In fact, the academic community was deeply involved in support of the thrust of the '60s and the leaders of corporate capitalism came to loathe and, fanciful as it may seem, fear it. For example, the Trilateral Commission identified intellectuals as the root cause of the crisis of democracy and potentially as great a threat to America in the '70s as aristocrats, fascists, and communists had been in the past.¹² However liberals and leftists may view the outcome of the politics of the '60s and the role played by the academy in these politics, it is very clear that the corporate establishment was not pleased. Given the economic shifts analyzed above, corporate conservatives now view the traditional academy as dispensable. And they know it's vulnerable. By the late 1970s, the time was ripe for a full-scale assault designed to exploit this vulnerability. And right-wing forces were ready.

Conservative manifestos castigating the academy as a source of a more general crisis in American culture have become plentiful. Among the more revealing for our purposes is *A Time for Truth* (1978) by William Simon, head of the U.S. Olympic Com-

Because ideas are so important, conservatives regard control of the universities and research foundations as of first order importance.

mittee and former Secretary of the Treasury under Richard Nixon. In his final chapter, "The Road to Liberty," Simon summarizes his analysis. "There is tragic little awareness in the United States today," he says, "that a guiding philosophy lies behind the destruction we are seeing."¹³ This guiding philosophy, he explains, is "an egalitarian-redistributionist ideology promoted by a powerful political intelligentsia" that determines the trends in society today. He adds:

So here we are, with most of our politicians careening toward more and more central planning and our society ruled by a small band of moral and economic despots who ... *are* our universities and *are* our foundations and *are* our bureaucracies. They constitute the vocal intellectual superstructure of this country, and the functioning mind of our society.¹⁴

This identification of an "intelligentsia" that pervades the academy and which is at the root of America's problems is widespread amongst conservatives. It is clear from their writings that conservatives like Simon assign ideas and their transmission a fundamental place in the future

of American society. Ideas, they say, are cultural capital. Ideas are the engine which drives the growth and development—or demise—of society.

From this perspective America's success is based on a certain stock of cultural capital that includes the primacy of economic production and growth, the interdependence of free markets and political liberty, a repudiation of the ethics of egalitarianism, and a conscious prejudice against government intervention in all aspects of American life.

Simon and other like-minded critics see these values now being attacked and displaced by a new stock of cultural capital, that of an "adversary culture" in the academy, the media, and the government. These new values, perspectives, and goals, they say, are at odds with the workings of the economic, social, and political institutions and values of democratic capitalism.

Because ideas are so important, conservatives regard control of the universities and research foundations as of first order importance. For some, such as Arnold Beichman, this is cause for despair. Writing in *The New York Times Magazine*, he speaks of the new Dark Age into which American higher education has

At least one influential commentator speaks of a new Dark Age into which higher education has been plunged by anti-capitalist 'guerillas with tenure.'

been plunged by the adversary culture. This, he says, will continue as long as anti-capitalist "guerillas with tenure" control the academy. He sees little prospect for changing this situation in the foreseeable future, but offers conservative think tanks, such as his own Hoover Institute, as strongholds where the Truth will be preserved, much as it was preserved by monastic orders in an earlier Dark Age.¹⁵

While Beichman is apparently resigned to waiting out the Dark Age, his sympathizers are not. They have formulated plans to take control of intellectual life in America and replace the present "intellectual superstructure" with one dedicated to the promotion of conservative ideology. In their writings they speak of the need to destroy the existing academy, to seize control of its remains, and in its place to construct a new academy dedicated to democratic capitalism.

Since the late 1960s the number of conservative think-tanks has multiplied, and they have increased the vigor with which they pursue their goals. These include the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Ethics and Public Policy Center, the Institute for

Contemporary Studies, and the Institute for Educational Affairs. Of these, the Institute for Educational Affairs (IEA) is of special interest to educators, for it is specifically dedicated to building a conservative academy.

The IEA is important because of its ties to powerful corporate philanthropy and to high political office. Contributors to the IEA include Bendix, Dow Chemical, E.F. Hutton, Ford Motor Company, General Electric, Nestle, and Standard Oil, among many others. Its board of directors has included a number of persons who served in the first Reagan presidential campaign or held key positions on the Reagan transition team in 1980. At the present time several IEA board members serve in the Reagan Administration. Prominent among these is the Secretary of Education, William Bennett. In addition, through its activities, the IEA is tied into a network of some of the most prestigious conservative think-tanks in the country.

The IEA was founded in 1978 by prominent conservative thinkers William Simon and Irving Kristol. The IEA believes itself to be engaged in a war of ideas with the so-called "adversary culture" and proposes to carry on the battle by building a close

One new think tank of the Right now ranks among the 100 largest educational foundations in the country.

collaboration between the corporate world and the conservative academic community. Its aim is to develop and support a core of sympathetic intellectuals.

Based on its financial backing and its record of activity, the IEA now ranks among the 100 largest educational foundations in the country. IEA's efforts to bring together the corporate world and right-wing intellectuals with the goal of creating a more conservative academy is, however, only the tip of the iceberg. Other conservative foundations, such as the John M. Olin Foundation, have joined the IEA in this crusade. Moreover, IEA influence extends well beyond its own financial efforts. A grant from the IEA serves as a signal to corporate philanthropy at large that here is a conservative cause worth supporting.

New Right leaders have even more ambitious designs. They argue that while it is desirable to establish conservatives in positions of power and influence, this alone will not lead to the conservative America they envision. This, they say, is because the institutions themselves—the Congress, the courts, the academy—are liberal institutions with liberal agendas. In fact, the New Right advocates what Samuel Francis

has labeled the “New Caesarism”—the use of the Executive Branch to destroy the offending institutions as a first step in the reconstruction of America.

Under the guise of “New Federalism,” the Caesarist strategy is now being directed against the academy. In this assault the entire system of federal funding has come under attack. Federal agencies and programs which disperse funds for higher education, research, and scholarship have been gutted or restructured. In addition, the administration is shifting responsibility to state governments and boards of higher education. Given their own priorities, however, the states are unlikely to fill the federal funding gap, especially in the area of the liberal arts, and are most likely to concentrate aid to higher education directly related to economic development.

Conservatives today are encouraged by the right-wing shift in the American political spectrum and by the gains conservatism has made in society at large. They see liberalism as in retreat and are becoming cautiously optimistic about the possibility of creating the conservative America they envision. At the same time the political and social influence

Educational policies will increasingly reflect narrow economic priorities and corporate interests. Higher education will become a technical training ground.

of the liberal and left academic establishment is anathema to these leaders. They see the academy as the last bastion of resistance to the construction of a conservative America. They agree with William Rusher that:

...for the moment the opposition to the conservative movement—liberal and harder left alike—has retreated into its twin Alpine redoubts: the media and the academy. These, therefore, are likely to be the scene of conservatism's next battle and almost certainly in that order.¹⁸

The Right is under no illusions about the dimensions of this impending struggle with the academy. They view it, again in the words of Rusher, as "the most important battle of them all."¹⁹ Nevertheless, they are determined that the academy in its present form must go, that its vulnerability must be exploited at every turn. If the Right has its

way, conservative scholarship will ascend and opportunities for research will decline. Educational policies will increasingly reflect narrow economic priorities and corporate interests. For the majority of Americans, higher education will become a vast technical and ideological training ground.

The appointment of William Bennett as Secretary of Education is the clearest possible indication that the Reagan Administration is firmly committed to this cause. Bennett's call for each college and university to "accept its vital role as conveyor of the accumulated wisdom of our civilization"²⁰ is nothing less than a demand for the academy to promote conservative ideology.

What is planned for those institutions and organizations that resist? We shall see. While the results of the conservative assault on the academy to date have been profound, in the words of Ronald Reagan, "You ain't seen nothin' yet." ■

Footnotes

¹ Eli Ginzberg & George J. Vojta, "The Service Sector of the U.S. Economy," *Scientific American*, March, pp. 48-55 (1981).

² Vincent E. Giuliano has an excellent discussion of "preindustrial,"

"industrial," and "postindustrial" office work in "The Mechanization of Office Work," *Scientific American*, Sept., pp. 148-152, etc. (1981). His view of the liberating effect of computerization on of-

office work may be too optimistic, however. For another perspective see Phillip Kraft, *Programmers and Managers: The Routinization of Computer Programming in the United States*, Springer Verlag (1977).

³ Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, Monthly Review Press (1974).

⁴ David Noble, *America by Design*. Oxford Press. (1977), and *Forces of Production: A Social History of Industrial Automation*, Knopf (1984).

⁵ It must be understood that where one went to school had a great deal to do with what kind of white-collar employment one could hope to find, and that one's class, gender, and race had almost everything to do with where, and whether, one went to school (Cf. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, Basic Books, (1976). Rather than promoting social mobility, as the liberal advocates of education believed, the educational system instead served to preserve and strengthen class, racial, and gender hierarchies. Many children of immigrant blue-collar workers did change the color of their collars, but they remained just as near the bottom of the employment hierarchy as their parents. These shifts in employment between generations are better understood as a transformation of the economy than as examples of successful individual mobility.

⁶ Emma Rothschild, "Reagan and the Real America," *New York Review of Books*, Feb. 5, pp. 12-18 (1981).

⁷ Russel W. Rumberger, "The Changing Skill Requirements of Jobs in the U.S. Economy," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 34, No. 4, pp. 578-90 (1981).

⁸ Cf. Paul Tsongas, *The Road From Here: Liberals and Reality in the 1980s*, Random House (1981).

⁹ On the "success" of the '60s, see John E. Schwarz, *America's Hidden Success: A Reassessment of Twenty Years of Public Policy*, Norton (1984); on corporate reaction, see Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy*, New York University Press (1975).

¹⁰ M.J. Crozier, S.P. Huntington and J. Watanuki, *Ibid.*

¹¹ Everett Carl Ladd, Jr. & Seymour Martin Lipset, *The Divided Academy*, Norton (1975).

¹² Crozier, Huntington & Watanuki, *op. cit.*

¹³ Reader's Digest Press, p. 216.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 6-7.

¹⁵ "Is Higher Education in the Dark Ages?" Nov. 6, pp. 47-48.

¹⁶ "Message from MARs: The Social Politics of the New Right," in *The New Right Papers*, Robert W. Whitaker, ed., St. Martin's Press, pp. 65-83 (1982).

¹⁷ Cf. Mary Leonard, "School Daze," *Foundation News*, Vol. 22, No. 6, pp. 25-29 (1981) and "Abolishing the Federal Role in Higher Education," *Educational Record*, Vol. 63, No. 1, p. 137 (1982).

¹⁸ *The Rise of the Right*, William Morrow & Co., p. 322 (1984).

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 323.

²⁰ "The Humanities: An Obituary—And a Call for Rebirth," *The NEA Almanac of Higher Education*, NEA Communications Services, p. 37, (1985).